

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 EB-07 TRSE-00 /065 W
-----151707Z 079513 /50

R 151643Z JUN 77
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5059
INFO AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN
AMEMBASSY DUBLIN
AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE
AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG
AMEMBASSY PARIS
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USEEC ALSO FOR EMBASSY
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E.O.11652: N/A
TAGS: PFOR, PGOV, PINT, UK
SUBJECT: CALLAGHAN OPTS FOR FREE VOTE ON DIRECT
ELECTIONS

REF: LONDON 9300

SUMMARY - CALLAGHAN MOVED JUNE 14 TO EXTRICATE HIMSELF
FROM THE DIRECT ELECTIONS DILEMMA. HE HAS DECIDED TO
ALLOW A FREE VOTE ON THE PRINCIPLE OF DIRECT ELECTIONS
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TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, AS WELL AS ON THE QUESTION
OF THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM, FOR BOTH MEMBERS OF GOVERNMENT
AND LABOR BACKBENCHERS. STRESSING THE LIMITED NATURE OF
THIS SUSPENSION OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY, CALLAGHAN
SAID THAT MINISTERS WHO WISHED TO SPEAK OR CAMPAIGN
AGAINST DIRECT ELECTIONS WOULD HAVE TO RESIGN. THE
GOVERNMENT WILL MOVE QUICKLY TO INTRODUCE THE DIRECT

ELECTIONS BILL, EVEN THOUGH INSUFFICIENT TIME REMAINS FOR IT TO BE PASSED THIS SESSION. THIS WILL SHORTEN THE TIME NEEDED TO OBTAIN FINAL PASSAGE IN THE NEXT SESSION OF PARLIAMENT. CALLAGHAN'S DECISION TO RELAX THE COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY RULE HAS ONLY ONE PRECEDENT -- WILSON'S SIMILAR, BUT LESS LIMITED, ACTION DURING THE 1975 EC REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN -- AND IS CLEARLY A SIGN OF POLITICAL WEAKNESS. WHILE HIS ACTION HAS VIRTUALLY PRECLUDED A MAJOR SPLIT IN THE PARLIAMENTARY LABOR PARTY (PLP), ON THIS ISSUE IT HAS CAUSED SOME UNEASE IN THE LIBERAL CAMP. END SUMMARY.

1. PRIME MINISTER CALLAGHAN ANNOUNCED HIS LONG-AWAITED STRATEGY FOR AVOIDING A SEVERE SPLIT IN HIS GOVERNMENT AND PARTY OVER DIRECT ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT JUNE 14 IN A MEETING WITH THE PLP (REFTEL). BECAUSE OF INTENSE OPPOSITION TO DIRECT ELECTIONS ON THE PART OF SOME GOVERNMENT MINISTERS, INCLUDING CABINET MEMBERS, HE HAS DECIDED TO ALLOW THEM A FREE VOTE ON THE PRINCIPLE OF DIRECT ELECTIONS (I.E. SECOND READING OF THE BILL), AS WELL AS ON THE ISSUE OF THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM TO BE USED. THIS LICENSE, HE STRESSED, WOULD BE LIMITED TO THOSE TWO QUESTIONS: MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT WILL HAVE TO SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT ON ALL ASPECTS OF THE BILL, EXCEPT THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM, FOLLOWING SECOND READING. TO underscore this point, he told dissident ministers that they would have to resign before speaking or campaigning against direct elections.

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2. CALLAGHAN ALSO TOLD THE PLP THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD INTRODUCE THE DIRECT ELECTIONS BILL SHORTLY, EVEN THOUGH IT CANNOT BE PASSED BEFORE THE CLOSE OF THE CURRENT SESSION. IN THIS WAY, SOME COMMITTEE WORK CAN BE COMPLETED, THUS REDUCING THE TIME NEEDED TO OBTAIN FINAL PASSAGE IN THE SESSION WHICH BEGINS IN NOVEMBER. THE CABINET, HE SAID, WILL CONSIDER THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM QUESTION AT ITS REGULAR JUNE 16 MEETING, AND ONCE THAT DECISION IS TAKEN, THE BILL CAN BE INTRODUCED IN PARLIAMENT.

3. CALLAGHAN'S SOLUTION TO LABOR'S INTERNAL PROBLEMS ON DIRECT ELECTIONS WILL AFFECT THE GOVERNMENT'S ACCORD WITH THE LIBERALS. LIBERAL LEADER STEEL ALLUDED TO THIS POINT JUNE 14 WHEN HE TOLD THE PRESS THAT AN OVERT ANTI-EC CAMPAIGN BY THE LABOR PARTY WOULD THREATEN RE-NEWAL OF THE PACT. LIBERAL BACKBENCHERS WERE QUICK TO underscore this point once they had news of the prime minister's decision on direct elections, telling the

PRESS THAT PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION (PR) IS AN EX-
CEEDINGLY IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR THEIR PARTY AND SUGGESTING
THAT THEY EXPECTED THE GOVERNMENT TO RECOMMEND PR WHEN
THE BILL COMES TO THE FLOOR OF THE COMMONS.

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4. COMMENT: CALLAGHAN'S UNUSUAL DECISION -- THE ONLY
MODERN PRECEDENT WAS WILSON'S 1975 DECISION TO SUSPEND
COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE EC REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN
-- WAS PROBABLY THE BEST OF SEVERAL OPTIONS OPEN TO HIM.
ALTHOUGH AN EMBARRASSING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF POLITICAL
WEAKNESS AND COMPLICATING RENEWAL OF THE LIBERAL PACT,
IT SHOULD ALLOW HIM TO AVOID ANY KEY RESIGNATIONS FROM
GOVERNMENT AND A CRITICAL SPLIT IN THE PLP. IT SHOULD
ALSO ENSURE ULTIMATE PASSAGE OF THE DIRECT ELECTIONS

LEGISLATION, THOUGH NOT IN TIME FOR BRITAIN TO MAKE THE
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MAY-JUNE 1978 DEADLINE.

5. WE UNDERSTAND THE REDRAFTED DIRECT ELECTIONS BILL
CONTAINS TWO ALTERNATIVE CLAUSES REGARDING THE ELECTORAL
SYSTEM, ONE PROVIDING FOR ELECTIONS BY THE TRADITIONAL
FIRST-PAST-THE-POST SYSTEM IN 81 GEOGRAPHICAL CONSTITU-
ENCIES AND THE OTHER BY THE REGIONAL LIST PR SYSTEM.
WE EXPECT CALLAGHAN WILL URGE THE CABINET TO RECOMMEND
APPROVAL OF THE PR SYSTEM, ARGUING THAT THIS WILL
DEMONSTRATE THE GOVERNMENT'S GOOD FAITH TO THE LIBERALS,
FACILITATING RENEWAL OF THE LIBERAL PACT, AND MINIMIZE
THE TIME NEEDED TO PREPARE FOR ELECTIONS. HOWEVER, THE
BILL WOULD GO TO PARLIAMENT WITH BOTH OPTIONS. THE
CABINET WILL PROBABLY AGREE TO THIS, BUT WE STILL DO NOT
BELIEVE COMMONS WILL APPROVE PR ON A FREE VOTE.

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